

2020 Third Sunday of Lent: Psalm 23, The Revd Canon Patrick Curran, 15 March

It has been quite a week! Every day a new measure was announced by the Austrian government to stem the spread of Covid-19 which is affecting our common life at all levels speak to anyone in the catering trade. At the beginning of the week we were having to deal with limiting our Sunday main service to 100 persons. We had come up with a good and workable solution, but by Thursday that was *Schnee von gestern* meaning that was yesterday's snow.

In preparing for today, I was sure that we needed to focus on something that speaks to us out of the heart of the Bible. What we might call the voice of the Bible. And there it was smack in the middle of Psalm 23. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of the death I fear no evil. For you are with me, your rod and your staff comfort me." At this present time we have a real sense of walking through the valley of the shadow of death. It is palpable. This virus reminds us of our mortality that we are always this close to death a bit as in the song "only seven seconds away". The virus reminds us of the fragility of life, but it also reminds people of their real and existential fear of death. Gone are the times when people would have in their homes a memento mori (a reminder of death) often in the form of a human skull as depicted in Renaissance paintings. The Christian symbol of the empty cross reminds us of death vanquished and the crucifix reminds us of the death we too must face. Our memento mori?

There is a podcast that I listen to which mentions the virus Covid-19 in the context of a Christian perspective placing our anxieties and fears in a much larger frame than the one that seems at hand to so many including friends, family and fellow Christians. I want to share a snippet from the podcast speaking to us in a language that isn't mine, but rings true nevertheless. Do not understand this citation as in any way belittling the measures being taken by the Austrian government about stemming the spread of the coronavirus, but rather as an appeal that reminds us that as Christians we always see our lives set within a much larger context as the psalmist says, "and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." (Ps. 23.6)

The podcaster noting first the threat of Covid-19 goes on to say, "1.6 million people die each year from TB. More than 3000 people a day die from suicide... Thirteen hundred people die per day... being killed by other human beings. It is funny how the coronavirus has really got hold of this [the reality of dying] in a particular way. There is social contagion. The more you say, "Don't panic!" the more people panic. I think that social contagion is promoted through media, through the herd mentality it is .. serious and we see that occurring in different ways... Three percent will die of the virus." The podcaster goes on, "100 per cent of us are born with a disease. We are born with sin, which means that we all die and then after that to face judgement. It's funny we panic about coronavirus, but we don't consider our own eternal destiny. If you are listening to this and that issue doesn't bother you that is the issue that should bother you."

What these very direct words, these reflections of a Christian from another tradition within the household of the Church, remind us of is that we are mortal and that we are always in the valley of the shadow of death, even if other issues we must face are not in our sights. If we take Covid-19 seriously, as we must, can we bring the same degree of seriousness to our relationship with God? Worship and prayer are not an option. Living in Christian community is not an option. Acts of service are not an option. Confessing Christ crucified risen and crucified is not an option. What resources will be freed up in us and what resources can be called upon to do just this? What measures will we put in place to ensure our spiritual health? They too will be disruptive.

This is where the gap opens up for me. Yes, I take the Covid-19 virus seriously, because there are people who have an expertise that I do not possess, I trust them, but I also take the things listed by the podcaster above seriously, as well as the swarms of locusts over Eastern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula earlier in the year with unforeseeable consequences and the refugees presently on the border to the European Union. But in all of this we must take God, the reality of God, seriously never losing sight of the God who gives us life, sustains our life, inspires us and is our shepherd therefore I can lack nothing. Like the podcaster I see my life embedded in a larger framework than the framework that occupies this present moment in relation to but one challenge. This too will pass away... But I can, have and will give myself fully to this present moment as well and its implications. Emptying oneself, living a sacrificial life, which is a life of abundance and joy, but not without troubles, challenges, valleys and death, as Jesus going before us images.

As we look at Psalm 23 one scholar points out one little detail that speaks to me about my faith and what its centre must be, which you can simply set aside as a coincidence, but as a person of faith I get it. It is the “for you are with me”. In the Hebrew of Psalm 23, there are exactly twenty-six words before and after, “for you are with me”. A pastor of another tradition takes this up to speculate, “Perhaps the psalmist was boldly declaring that God being with us is at the very centre of our lives.” I welcome the ingenuity of placing God “for you are with me” at the centre of Psalm 23, but in truth God is at the centre of our lives. I want that for each of us, but I always want it desperately for this congregation, this church congregation. Fortunately (for all of us) it is not about what I want, but what God desires for each of us as individuals and as a community and that is to welcome God at the centre of our lives and not the God whom we occasionally visit and neglect as soon as it is convenient to us. God at the centre fueling our lives out of which we draw strength and direction. God is with us. God is Emmanuel and never more so than in Jesus. The angels proclaimed, “All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’”

“For you are with me” or “Thou art with me” is embedded in Psalm 23. It is at the centre of the psalm. And that is precisely how we are to see God. At the centre of our very being and our doing “God is with us”. God was a presence to the people of Israel in the ark in the wilderness. God’s presence in time was brought to the Temple in Jerusalem by King David. Now God’s presence no longer dwells in a shrine or in a particular place, but God’s presence is now in a people through baptism that calls on God’s redeeming generosity. We are made one in him through God’s saving action. His redemptive generosity as we read this week in our Lent book, *Saying yes to life*. Jesus goes on to assure us saying that where two or three are gathered in my name there I am in the midst of them. And so we must continue to say our prayers, meet for prayer, even if we can no longer gather for worship we can still gather in twos or threes on the phone, via Skype, through FaceTime or Zoom to name a few ways – gather for prayer. We can pray daily prayer with the Church throughout the world using for example the Daily Prayer app of the Church of England.

The season of Lent calls Christians the world over to take seriously the sin that clings so closely in all its varying disguises, urging that we should neither cloak nor dissemble them, but rather spread them out before God. If you want one picture of human depravity at this time consider the mother who loses a struggle with a man for the last carton of eggs on the supermarket shelf. A man who already has five cartons of eggs, fifty eggs in all. During the season of Lent the Church calls us to repent of our sin and turn to Christ. It calls us to remember that we are made of dust and to dust

we shall return. Give attention to yourselves with a seriousness becoming of God as creator, redeemer, sanctifier and as righteous judge.

The call to repentance is not given to put us down, but to raise us up. This is the insight that God affords us in Christ. Yes, we fall short again and again, but God raises us up through redemptive generosity. He raises us up by the vision that he sets before us. There is a verse that I have become fond of and wonder what it could mean for me and by extension for us. It inspires me. It is a beautiful image full of life and I commend it to you. The psalmist writes, "But I am like a spreading olive tree in the house of God; I trust in God's goodness for ever and ever." (Psalm 52:8) Jesus is the spreading olive tree that fills all of creation, fills God's house this creation with his presence. In taking up our cross and following Christ we can allow ourselves where we are placed to become like spreading olive trees trusting in God's goodness for he is with us. For as the psalmist says, in the valley of the shadow of death I fear no evil for you are with me for your rod and your staff comfort me. Amen.